



# Preface

## Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)



The landscape of rural America is changing. Wildlife habitats are being converted to agricultural uses, corridors (linear patches that differ from their surroundings) are removed to expand fields and urban development spreads across farms, forests, deserts, and prairies. The result is a fragmented landscape that exports significant quantities of sediment and chemical pollutants into waterways, lakes, and wetlands. This still evolving landscape has fewer, smaller, less connected patches of habitat and frequently degraded water quality that stresses aquatic ecosystems. Its capacity to sustain a diversity of plant, animal, and aquatic species is declining at an accelerating rate. The loss of biodiversity has become a national concern.

Land managers have turned to corridors to perform a more central role in the conservation of soil, water, fish and wildlife in fragmented rural landscapes. The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is committed to assisting in the revitalization and linkage of the nation's landscape corridors to construct sustainable landscapes.

The NRCS is the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) agency charged with providing assistance to private landowners who voluntarily adopt and implement conservation practices. It offers a variety of programs, recommends conservation practices, and in many cases, assists landowners in the design and implementation of corridors and other conservation measures.

The types of conservation corridor practices in the NRCS toolbox include:

- Riparian/stream buffers
- Wetland, lake, and reservoir buffers
- Field borders
- Field buffers
- Filter strips
- Grassed waterways
- Vegetated ditches
- Grassed terraces and diversions
- Windbreak/shelterbelts
- Hedgerows

When these practices and other NRCS programs are combined, they can create significant systems of conservation corridors and land management activities to improve habitat and enhance landscape functions.

Many of the ecological functions of corridors operate at scales larger than an individual property or corridor. The prospect for optimizing the functions of conservation corridors in combination with other practices is highest when they are planned at a watershed or landscape scale.





The NRCS is actively promoting the preservation, enhancement, restoration, and reclamation of existing corridors and new plantings at an area-wide scale. Implementing successful corridor projects requires the cooperation of private landowners, local governments, private non-profit conservation organizations, and state and federal agencies working at both landscape and site-specific scales.

Partnerships are at the heart of all conservation initiatives. Private conservation organizations such as Pheasants Forever, Ducks Unlimited, Quail Unlimited, National Wild Turkey Federation, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, The Nature Conservancy, and others actively seek opportunities to work with landowners on habitat preservation and restoration projects. With proper direction, volunteer groups like the Future Farmers of America, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, 4 H, and various service clubs can also make valuable contributions.

State and local governments also play a valuable role in the development of watershed or area-wide scale plans. They can encourage landowner participation and public support by including corridor systems as part of the open space or natural resource section of state, regional, or county comprehensive plans. Official recognition in a plan showcases the importance of corridors in the landscape. It also presents a graphic image of what a system of corridors might look like. The Iowa River Corridor Project, coordinated by the NRCS, is among the nation's finest examples of partnering and the supportive role local government can play (see Case Study pp. 6-39).

The NRCS, Soil and Water Conservation Districts and other USDA Service Center staff are also key partners. They direct farmers, ranchers, landowners, and communities to sources of technical and financial assistance for corridor development. Sources include USDA, state, and local programs offered through local conservation districts. The NRCS will develop general planning and design guidelines and regional-specific details. Field personnel will provide on-site technical assistance to farmers and ranchers. They will also advise landowners on how to optimize corridor benefits by combining them with other NRCS conservation initiatives.

*Partnerships and cooperation among all those committed to land, water, and wildlife conservation are vital. But the real key to success will be the farmers, ranchers, and suburban landowners willing to participate in conservation corridor projects.*

This handbook has been prepared for NRCS field office personnel and their partners in wildlife conservation. It is intended to help facilitate conservation corridor planning for wildlife at the watershed scale (the terms "area-wide" and "watershed" are used interchangeably when referring to planning scales larger than a site, farm, or ranch). It is primarily directed at corridors in agriculturally dominated landscape. The handbook is a source book for ideas, examples, and wildlife corridor planning principles. It is also a technical guide for wildlife corridor planning at both watershed and conservation plan scales. However, the real value of this handbook will be realized only when area-wide wildlife corridor plans are implemented and wildlife habitat is an integral part of every conservation practice.

